

### Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support

RESEARCH BRIEF ● AUGUST 2002

#### Benefits Associated with Participation in School Sports and Other Extracurricular Activities in Adolescence

#### **Key findings**

Students who participate in school team sports or other extracurricular activities are more likely than nonparticipants to like school and do homework and they have better relationships with their parents, teachers, and friends. They are also less likely to be truant, smoke cigarettes, use marijuana, vandalize property, get into fights, or be sexually active. Students involved in school sports *plus* some other type of activity, such as clubs, band, or volunteer work, have the highest rates of healthy behaviors and the lowest rates of risk behaviors.

These findings have important implications for making structured activities available to youth and encouraging their participation. This study was conducted by the Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support because of its commitment to fostering healthy youth development. The study was based on 2001 Minnesota Student Survey statewide results for ninth graders.

#### Sports versus other structured activities

Involvement in school sports appears to have some unique protective effects. Sports participation is associated with higher self-esteem, less sadness and anxiety, and lower rates of suicidal behavior than participation in other types of extracurricular activities alone. Students involved in school sports are also much more likely than other students to meet guidelines for regular exercise and they are more likely to see themselves as about the right weight.

Involvement in activities other than sports has special benefits as well. It is associated with higher rates for doing homework and lower rates of alcohol use, marijuana use, and vandalism than involvement in sports alone.

#### Participation by gender and race/ethnicity

Sports participation rates were roughly equal for boys (58%) and girls (56%). However, differences are associated with race/ethnicity and family structure. White students were much more likely to be involved in school sports than students of color (60% versus 43%). Students from two-parent homes were more likely to be involved in any type of extracurricular activity than those from single-parent homes (74% versus 59%).

#### **Understanding the relationships**

The relationships found between participation and behaviors or attitudes do not prove that participation produces all the positive benefits seen. It may be that healthier adolescents choose to become involved in a wider variety of activities. Nonetheless, participation in organized activities provides a context for personal growth, exposure to health-promotion messages, and interaction with supportive adults and peers. Being engaged in activities promotes a sense of "connectedness" to a broader community, which research has shown exerts a very strong protective effect against risk behavior in adolescence. Participation in school sports, in particular, may benefit mental health in two ways: through the camaraderie with teammates and through the effects of physical exertion on brain chemistry.

For data analyses, students were classified into four groups based on their participation in structured activities: team sports at school ("Sports"), activities such as clubs, band, and volunteer work ("Activities"), "Neither" of these, or "Both" of these.

Sports participation, alone or with other activities, is associated with higher rates of exercise



Participation in non-sports activities, alone or with sports, is associated with higher rates of liking school

Likes school very much or quite a bit

■Boys ■Girls

Neither Sports Activities Both

Participation level

#### **Policy Implications**

Two recent trends make this study particularly timely. Nationally and locally, demands for accountability in schools have resulted in increased emphasis on improving academic performance. Unfortunately, this attention has been accompanied by a de-emphasis on physical education in school. At a time when obesity rates and related health problems among children and adolescents are rising, adequate time and support for physical activity is essential.

The study reported here found that adolescents who are not involved in school sports are much less likely than sports participants to get the amount of physical exercise recommended by public health experts. Less active students also reported more depression and anxiety. School sports, physical education classes, and other types of regular physical activity need to be recognized as effective methods to promote both physical and mental health among adolescents.

This study did not address the barriers or deterrents to participation in sports and other extracurricular activities. However, the lower participation rates for adolescents of color and those from single-parent families raise the possibility that limited financial resources play a role. This possibility needs to be considered in light of the recent trend in some areas to enhance school revenue by initiating or increasing activity fees. Short-term gains may prove to be costly in the long term if activity fees deter youth from participating in healthy developmental activities. Creative solutions may be needed to encourage more youth to be involved in extracurricular activities and to provide funding for what may be an extremely beneficial investment in the future of our youth.

For more information about this study, contact:

### Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support Research Division

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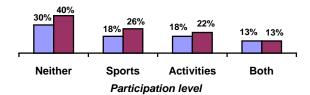
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The survey was administered by the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning. Data base management was provided by the Minnesota Department of Human Services. Analyses were based on survey responses from 47,434 Minnesota public school students in Grade 9 conducted by the Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support Research Division.

If you need this document in an alternative format, please call 612/673-2301 or TTY 612/673-2157 (General City Information).

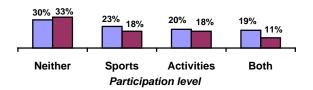
Participation in sports or other activities, especially both, is associated with lower rates of smoking

### Smoked cigarettes in past month ■Boys ■Girls



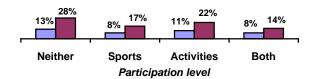
Participation in sports or other activities, especially both, is associated with lower rates of sexual activity

# Has had sexual intercourse ■Boys ■Girls



Participation in sports, alone or with other activities, is associated with lower rates of sadness

## Feels sad all or most of the time ■Boys ■Girls



Participation in sports, alone or with other activities, is associated with lower rates of suicidal thoughts

# Had suicidal thoughts past year ■Boys ■Girls

